Opinion
Guest Voices




A sign outside the Internal Revenue Service building is photographed May 4, 2021, in Washington. (AP/File/Patrick Semansky)



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Now that churches have won the right to endorse political candidates, it’s fair to ask why churches would want to do that in the first place.

The religious right has hoped for the repeal of the Johnson Amendment since at least 2007, but for practical purposes the measure has only been truly endangered since the 2017 National Prayer Breakfast, when, in characteristic and less-than-redolently religious language, President Donald Trump pledged to “totally destroy” it.



Steven Millies (RNS/Mark Campbell)

Proposed by then-Senator Lyndon Johnson, the amendment entered the Internal Revenue Code as a provision of law in 1954. It says that charitable organizations may be exempt from federal taxes if they do “not participate in, or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office.”

In their book “Politics, Taxes, and the Pulpit,” Nina J. Crimm and Laurence H. Winer conclude on the basis of Robert Caro’s magisterial biography of Johnson and the wider historical record that Johnson was thinking less about limiting the political

interventions of churches than worrying that charitable organizations would be used to support the red-baiting Sen. Joseph McCarthy and his GOP allies.

In other words, he was seeking to forestall the forerunners of today's dark money organizations that funnel untraceable money into political campaigns. The amendment's limitation on religious organizations, which were also granted tax-exempt charitable status, was an unintended byproduct.

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Still, the Johnson Amendment corresponds well with the intent of the authors of the Constitution. James Madison warned against the fallout if "our laws (were) to intermeddle with Religion." Thomas Jefferson famously wrote of "a wall of separation between Church & State," and included in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom — an inspiration for the First Amendment, guided through the Virginia Legislature by Madison — the idea "that our civil rights have no dependance on our religious opinions."

It has been unusual in the intervening centuries for religious groups to seek influence or power directly through the U.S. political process. Exceptions are notable. The abolition movement of the 19th century and the temperance movement of the 20th come immediately to mind. Both sought to mobilize believers to achieve a religiously motivated objective.

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The more recent Civil Rights Movement and the anti-abortion movement, which both fall within the lifespan of the Johnson Amendment, also sought to mobilize believers and leverage the political process. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders never focused much attention on repealing the Johnson Amendment. The anti-abortion movement certainly did and largely achieved its primary objective in 2022's Supreme Court decision in Dobbs v. Jackson, but its preachers never much scrupled over endorsing the Republican Party, if not candidates by name.

It's difficult, then, to imagine who would be freed now by repealing the Johnson Amendment now.

Or, it’s difficult to imagine who would be freed to pursue primarily religious goals. The Pew Research Center has found that support for Trump among those who frequently attend religious services grew from 2016 to 2020 to 2024. The president has done particularly well among white evangelicals, the voters most engaged with Christian nationalism, which unabashedly hopes to transform the U.S. into a “Christian nation,” collapsing the distinction between church and state.

For these reasons, it is not difficult to discern the outline of what’s at work here. Trump seeks to reward and encourage those supporters, and those believers see in Trump a “modern-day Cyrus” — a figure who stands outside the community but through whom God has chosen to act. He has now delivered on a promise to free those who want to enact their version of Christianity, enlisting the power of government without fear of consequences if they endorse candidates.

An attendee kneels in front of the stage as Paula White, senior adviser to the White House Fa

An attendee kneels in front of the stage as Paula White, senior adviser to the White House Faith Office, in yellow, leads a prayer next to U.S. President Donald Trump during the National Day of Prayer in the Rose Garden at the White House in Washington May 1, 2025. Also pictured in back, fourth from left, is Bishop Robert E. Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minn. (OSV News /Evelyn Hockstein, Reuters)

The political activities of evangelical churches and religious organizations are bound to become more aggressively partisan. We shouldn’t be surprised if they begin to seem less religious.

Edmund Burke, the 18th-century Anglo-Irish parliamentarian and political philosopher who is considered “the founder of modern conservatism,” wrote in 1790, “No sound ought to be heard in the church but the healing voice of Christian charity,” calling it a “confusion of duties” to preach politics from the pulpit. He added, “Surely the church is a place where one day’s truce ought to be allowed to the dissensions and animosities of mankind.”

There will be no such luck anymore, not now that spiritual leaders will have freedom to turn their sanctuaries into political meetings. The new post-Johnson Amendment regime is bound to be helpful to Republicans but unlikely to advance the cause of religion.

It would be interesting to see what would happen if spiritual leaders begin to endorse candidates from their pulpits who oppose Trump and the Republicans, perhaps standing on the scriptural ground of the Book of Exodus, which instructs Christians, “You must not oppress the foreigner.”

Strangely, I cannot help thinking that the Johnson Amendment would be quickly raised back to life.